Author’s response to reviews

Title: Spatial Distribution and Characteristics of Injecting Drug Users (IDU) in Five Northeastern States of India

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Author’s response to reviews: see over
Reviewer: Danielle Ompad

Major Compulsory Revision

1. **Query:** In the abstract and throughout the manuscript, there is reference to “the interventional program.” It is unclear if the authors are trying to evaluate a particular intervention or if they are referring to interventions in general. Please be more specific.

   **RESPONSE:** By “interventional program”, we are mainly referring to needle syringe exchange programs (NSEP) which is generally operated by NGOs through out-reach workers or drop-in-centres (DIC). Changes have been highlighted in the manuscript as per suggestion. Our data is indirectly evaluating NSEP program. Also, we think that the overall programs will be benefited from this study. Hence, we have mentioned about “interventional programs” in few places (in conclusion) as a general remark and recommendation of the study.

2. There is reference to illicit sexual activities. What exactly do you mean here?

   **RESPONSE:** The term “illicit sex work” is used to refer “sex work” by female IDUs. The term “illicit sexual activities” is also not preferred by other reviewer. In view of the reviewers comment, we have replaced this as ‘sex work’.

3. Were any key informants IDUs?

   **RESPONSE:** IDUs were used as KIs for mapping of IDU location (Page 6 & Page 7).
4. Have older IDUs been injecting longer? It could be that older IDUs started around the same calendar time as the younger IDUs. In other words could the older IDUs be recent initiates or do they have longer drug using careers?

**RESPONSE:** The information regarding drug using history was not collected in the study. However, findings of our previous study suggest that the older drug users usually have longer drug using career in this region. We have included this in the discussion section (**page 21, paragraph 2**).

5. I am unclear on the in-depth interviews.

a. I think of in-depth interviews as being a qualitative interview, it seems as though the interview was both quantitative and qualitative. If qualitative, the sample sizes are a lot larger than is typically seen in such studies.

**RESPONSE:** Yes, interviews were both qualitative and quantitative. Therefore, some changes have been made in the paragraph (**Page 9, paragraph 2**) regarding interviews of IDUs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative information (we have omitted the word “in-depth”). But, we also asked some structured and closed ended questions to gather some key information (e.g. regarding sharing of needle/syringes in past six months and network size). Results of closed-ended structured questions (e.g. needle/syringe sharing behaviours in past six month and network size) were analyzed quantitatively and expressed as percentage of total responses. The study was designed to include at least one IDU from each identified locations. Accordingly, we included only 1-2 IDUs from each of the identified locations. Hence, the sample size appears to be larger.
b. You write about developing a friendship with drug users. Such a recruitment approach seems potentially coercive. Did you mean that the field teams developed rapport with the IDUs?

**RESPONSE:** The rapport building with the IDUs was interpreted as developing friendship with drug users. We have corrected it in our manuscript. “The field teams spent times in the locations interacting with the drug users in order to build rapport with them.” *(Page 8 and paragraph 1)*

c. How long were the interviews? How were the codes developed for the in-depth interviews?

**RESPONSE:** The interviews were brief as we covered only few areas and also included structured close-ended questions *(Page 9)*. The process of developing codes is described in the analysis section as suggested.

e. Please provide a bit more description of the manual analysis.

**RESPONSE:** Some more description of our analysis process has been included in the analysis section as advised.

6. Need a table describing the demographics of those that participated in the in-depth interviews.

**RESPONSE:** IDUs who fulfilled the eligibility criteria were included as the respondents for structured and semi-structured interviews. However, it was decided not to collect any other personal information about the participants.

**Minor Essential Revisions**

7. While generally well written, some help will still be needed with English grammar and spelling.
**RESPONSE:** The manuscript has been reviewed by my colleagues and all the authors to correct the spellings and grammar.

8. Acronyms need to be defined in the text the first time they are used.

**RESPONSE:** Suggested changes have been made in the manuscript.

9. Need a reference for the sentinel surveillance if available.

**RESPONSE:** No data is available in public domain after 2008; hence we are not able to include the reference.

10. Need to define a “godown” and “ritual places” (p. 14) for the non-Indian reader.

**RESPONSE:** The meaning of “godown” and “ritual places” are given in the bracket as suggested. “Ritual place” has been replaced as “place of religious functions” without mentioning the name of the religion as it is a sensitive issue (Page 14).
Reviewer: V. Anna Gyarmathy

Major Compulsory Revisions

11. The manuscript needs SERIOUS AND THOROUGH language editing.

   RESPONSE: The manuscript has been reviewed by other authors and my colleagues to correct spelling mistakes and grammars.

12. “Illicit sexual activities” is too vague. If it is sex work, please call it “sex work”.

   RESPONSE: Changes have been made as advised in the manuscript.

13. The authors say they collected sociometric data. Sociometric is a synonym of sociocentric, and it refers to data that connects each and every member of the network to everybody else (see Neaigus A.: The Network Approach and Interventions To Prevent HIV among Injection Drug Users. Public Health Reports. 1998, 113, Suppl 1, 140-150). The authors did not collect sociometric/sociocentric data. They collected aggregate network data. “Networking” is still incorrectly used. It should be “interaction among networks”.

   RESPONSE: This is true that we collected aggregate network data. Changes have been made as per advice (Page 9). We have also used the term “interaction” in place of “Networking” as suggested.

14. The authors still have no category for age 25 – they have younger than 25 and older than 25. How about 25? Is 25 younger than 25 or older than 25? No, 25 is 25. Please correct- see my original comments about age groups.
RESPONSE: We are sorry for the inadvertent error. We have rectified the error. Actually, the first group should be “less than or equal to 25 years of age” (≤25 years) and second group is “more than 25 years”. Age 25 is included in the former group (changes with red font).